

ly situated," he regards Senn's argument as bogus. Far better it would have been to cite the "family and other obligations [that] quite rightly enter into [one's] reflections about whether or not to become Catholic"—obligations of an essentially nontheological character.

Neuhaus ignores the one obligation that cannot be relegated to the category of the miscellaneous "other": the obligation of the shepherd to his flock, an obligation solemnly undertaken at one's ordination into the Holy Ministry. Far from being just one of many "other," however valid, reasons, this is "of the very essence" of the Church.

Pastor Senn's fidelity to this obligation is exemplary in both his ministry in Evanston, Illinois, and his ministry to us who, with him, have subscribed to the Rule of the Society of the Holy Trinity. Pastor Senn's ministry embodies the fullness of the church where Christ gives himself ever and again to his own.

I do not presume to judge the decision of Phillip Max Johnson to leave his devoted flock in Jersey City and

his equally devoted brothers and sisters in the Society of the Holy Trinity to convert to the Catholic Church. However, I do not think it an overstatement to say that we are all deeply saddened and that our sense of loss will not soon depart. Meanwhile, it would be nice if Neuhaus would leave off chiding us "left-behind Lutherans" for our "defective" ecclesiology. We heard you the first time, Richard, and again, and again, and . . .

Richard J. Niebanck, S.T.S.
Delhi, New York

Martyrology Today

I was pleased, as I always am, to be instructively rebuked by Fr. Neuhaus in the December issue of *FIRST THINGS* ("While We're At It"). But can he really mean it when he says that Christians should not be ready to shed their own blood in the service of, and as a sign of solidarity with, other Christians? Does he forget the martyrs?

Among the points I was making, ineptly no doubt, in the *Christian*

Century essay he criticized was that martyrdom is a properly ecclesial death and that willingness to accept it is a properly ecclesial act. This means (among other things) that willingness to shed one's own blood in this way is a sign of deep solidarity with other Christians, past and present, living and dead. We American Christians, I argued, have been taught to make our fellow citizens the only proper recipients of such a sign, and thus to displace martyrdom from Church to state. Surely Fr. Neuhaus would agree that something is wrong here?

Paul J. Griffiths
Arthur J. Schmitt Professor of
Catholic Studies
University of Illinois at Chicago

RJN replies:

Prof. Griffiths' letter marvelously clarifies what he intended to say in his reflection on the letter of President Ahmadinejad of Iran. Of course, we are in complete agreement in honoring martyrs who place their allegiance to Christ and his Church above the demands of the state.

Responses to "Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy"

In the exchanges between Alyssa Pitstick and Edward Oakes, S.J., on the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar (December 2006 and January 2007), Fr. Oakes unfortunately misrepresents the teaching of Pius XII and Vatican II on the primacy of Scripture. Readers of *FIRST THINGS* should not be misled. Pius XII told exegetes that they must seek out not only the literal meaning "intended and expressed by the sacred writer" but also the spiritual sense "intended and ordained by God." Vatican II did indeed teach (as Oakes mentioned) that the Magisterium is not above the

Word of God—but the Word of God was not Scripture alone; Scripture, said the council, cannot stand apart from tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. Exegetes, according to Vatican II, must take account of living tradition and the "analogy of faith." These directives undermine Oakes' critique of Pitstick's use of Scripture.

In her replies, Alyssa Pitstick mentions that, in promulgating the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope John Paul II taught a position opposed to Balthasar's on the descent into hell. He did so again in *Crossing*

the Threshold of Hope, where he affirmed, against Balthasar, that Christ clearly revealed that some will in fact "go to eternal punishment." Also, in his *Catechesis on the Creed*, John Paul explains that Christ did not go to the hell of the damned but that his soul entered the beatific vision from the very moment of his death. Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison (1 Pet. 3:19), according to John Paul, indicates "metaphorically the extension of Christ's salvation to the just men and women who had died before him." These positions of the pope have nothing to do with

double predestination, a red herring brought up in Oakes' critique of Pitstick.

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.
Fordham University
New York, New York

Alyssa Lyra Pitstick argues that Balthasar's theology, which has Christ suffering in the hell of the damned during Holy Saturday, is inconsistent with what the Catholic Church has traditionally taught, which was that Christ descended not in suffering but in triumph, entering only the abode of the righteous dead in order to lead them to the beatific vision of heaven.

As Pitstick points out, the Church's traditional teachings are normative for Catholics. More precisely, following the First Vatican Council as confirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*, Catholics are required (a) to believe with theological faith everything contained in the Word of God, whether written or handed down in tradition, which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed; (b) to accept firmly and hold each and every thing definitively proposed by the Church regarding teaching on faith and morals, even when such things are not proposed as divinely revealed; and (c) to adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings that either the Roman pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act. Truths in the first two classes the Church teaches infallibly; those in the third, while still normative in the sense indicated, are not taught infallibly.

The issue, therefore, is how the Church has taught its traditional doctrine about the descent into hell. The traditional teaching has an

impressive pedigree: Among the ancient fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch arguably mentions the doctrine, and St. Irenaeus and St. Cyril of Jerusalem certainly teach it. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas explain it at length, expressly rejecting the view, subsequently adopted by Balthasar, that Christ suffered in the hell of the lost. The *Roman Catechism* contains an elaborate presentation of the traditional doctrine. Such theological manuals as Tanquerey's *Theologia Dogmatica* and the *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, which bishops used in seminaries to educate generations of priests, likewise give the traditional teaching. Throw in the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which repeats the traditional teaching at length, and it seems clear that the Roman pontiff and the College of Bishops have certainly enunciated this teaching in the exercise of their authentic Magisterium and may well have taught it by their ordinary and universal Magisterium as something to be believed as divinely revealed. Even if only the former is true, the traditional teaching is binding on Catholics.

To the extent that his response engages with Pitstick, Oakes does little more than note that then-cardinal Ratzinger wrote some things vaguely similar to what Balthasar said and later praised the man at his funeral. This is clearly inadequate. Having raised a serious and scholarly question, Pitstick deserves a serious and scholarly answer. Oakes merely dismisses Pitstick as an "anxiously orthodox" "über-traditionalist," accuses her of having phobias about Protestants, and argues that Pitstick's views on various irrelevant issues are mistaken. Worse, Oakes sometimes implies that Pitstick's scholarship is shoddy, perhaps even fraudulent, as when he says that he was unable to locate, either in *Books in Print* or online, a book by Cardinal Ratzinger called *The Sabbath of History* to which Pitstick refers. In

fact, it took me two minutes online to find and order a copy of the book from Alibris.

Robert T. Miller
Villanova School of Law
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In his first article, Edward Oakes' theological objections focus on the issue of the breadth of redemption. He seems to think that Ms. Pitstick's view rules out the redemption of real sinners. But, even if we grant the existence of something like the limbo of the fathers, we don't know who might have been in it. Certainly it includes David, for example, whose sin against Uriah was carried out "with a high hand," and therefore not covered by the atoning sacrifices of the Old Covenant. He would stand in need of the redemption of a sinner. So would Manasseh, perhaps the most disastrously sinful of Judah's kings, who left repentance to the last minute. A number of the early Fathers suggest, at least obliquely, that some of those outside Israel who had died before the coming of Christ would also be saved. But does, or even can, Christ save the *unrepentant*?

In any case, it's not clear to me that even that question touches the most controvertible points in Balthasar's teaching. The pertinent points are exegetical, Trinitarian, Christological, and perhaps philosophical. In those areas, one could make the case that Balthasar's doctrine is not only novel but also problematic. How can it be that, within the undivided Trinity, the Father rejects the Son, and where in Scripture do we have any indication of that? How can it be that the Father rejects the Son even "as man," as some suggest, if indeed our High Priest is without sin, as Hebrews avers? Certainly the Father willed the sacrifice of the Son, the offering of his life that involved the horrors of his condemnation by sinful human beings and his abandonment

by his own disciples. The question is whether the Father and Son were personally alienated from one another, even in virtue of the Son's human nature, and even for a limited time. The difficulties in that position, which is expressed quite audaciously in *Mysterium Paschale*, and more judiciously in the *Theo-drama*, touch on the Trinity and the unity of Christ's Godhead and manhood in one hypostasis.

Though he fails to make good on the point, Fr. Oakes is right in his first response in calling for a return to the biblical text as the foundation of a debate, and it is a shame he chooses to take up other issues in his second response. If we are to be true to the tradition in such an engagement, we must enter a dialectic among its commentators. If we do so, we will discover, I think, that there are more-compelling interpretations of Christ's cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" which Balthasar makes the hermeneutical key to the Passion. Similarly, 2 Corinthians 5:21 ("he made him to be sin who knew no sin") is susceptible to interpretations more compelling than those Balthasar offers.

Balthasar's interpretations of these texts create further difficulties in reconciling them with other biblical texts, such as Hebrews' strong assertion of Christ's sinlessness and "separation from sinners." The reference to Christ as "having become a curse for us" in Galatians 3:13 does not in itself serve to substantiate the brief case Fr. Oakes is making. In short, in his first response, Fr. Oakes seems to suggest that Balthasar clearly has the New Testament, and especially St. Paul, on his side. I'm not so sure about that, and I wonder why so few figures in the Christian tradition have read Paul in that way. As for the significance of "the third day," an echo of many Old Testament passages, it certainly indicates a kind of hiatus, but why not the more tradi-

tional "rest" of Christ rather than his rejection?

The issues surrounding how to understand Christ's sacrifice (e.g., is it representative or substitutionary? is it an alienation from the Father? is "bearing" sin equivalent to being identified with sin?); what it might mean to say, as Balthasar does, that hell has "entered into" the holy Trinity; and the implications of our decisions on such issues for how we think about God and preach the gospel are the truly gripping matters. Much less important, and perhaps impossible to resolve, is the question of the state of Balthasar's mind and intentions when he formulated his conclusions. Fr. Oakes' worry about turning the gospel into "bad news" is right on the mark. But then we have to ask: Is it good news to posit a paternal love into which we are adopted that includes, seemingly of its essence, rejection? Is a Trinity whose internal relations are, in any way, a function of sin good news?

John Yocum
Greyfriars Hall, Oxford
Oxford, England

Balthasar's Holy Saturday theology reveals a troubling understanding of divine love. Can we truly speak of divine love when the Father would allow his Son to experience the punishment of the damned without even the hope of salvation? What is the foundational model of love being used, and what is the process of analogous predication whereby we can speak intelligibly of God's perfect love?

Pitstick mentions Adrienne von Speyr in passing. But it is striking that when Balthasar's theology becomes most speculative, the biblical, patristic, and Scholastic quotations seem to stop and Speyr takes over. The teachings that emerge from her private revelations are rarely situated. Rather, Balthasar almost seems to treat them as windows into the divine life or Christ's experience in hell. Yet

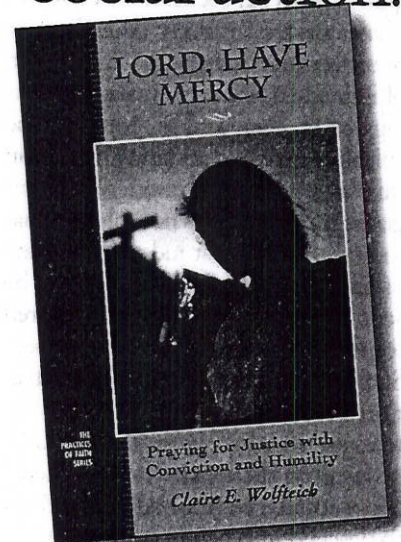
all such visions always already involve an element of human judgment and interpretation. What are these interpretive steps, and how do Balthasar's own guiding philosophical and theological principles influence them? Is Balthasar a disciple of Speyr, or is Speyr a Balthasarian?

The pursuit of such questions is precisely the task of theologians struggling with Balthasar's attempt to develop the tradition. Perhaps Pitstick should leave the work of handing out convictions to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P.
Blessed Sacrament Priory & Parish
Seattle, Washington

Edward Oakes claims that the denizens of Alyssa Pitstick's purgatory are those Jews who obeyed the Mosaic law, the pagans who followed

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the natural law, and of course those who managed to repent of sins committed against either prescription. Rightly he points out that St. Paul would identify them, on that basis, as devoid of hope. In the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, however, we recognize that Mary's graced conception took place because of "the salvation Christ would bring by his death." Isn't the basis for righteousness in the times before Christ an application of the merits of Christ's salvific action before the historical event took place in time? Therefore, it is not a stretch to say that those in the limbo of the fathers were recipients of grace but at a time before Christ. By grace, not the law, they were saved.

Fr. Bill Hayward, M.I.C.
Kenosha, Wisconsin

Oakes critiques Pitstick's speculations on the nature of purgatory for pre-Christian persons of admirable character and goodwill, which Pitstick has reasons to believe is the limbo of the fathers. Yet Oakes' real quarrel with her seems to be Pitstick's silence on the "entirely objective fact of universal redemption." A selection of individual sentences from the writings of St. Paul and St. John can be cobbled together to bring focus on this favorite idea of modern theologians. But Oakes has not told us what to do with the "last judgment" scene in Scripture, where the goats will be sent off into an eternal fire prepared for the devils and his angels; or where St. Paul tells us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling; or what to make of one of the seven last words of Jesus on the cross: "It is finished." How could it be finished if he had yet to descend into hell to expiate sin?

Tradition supplies the overarching theme that gives true meaning to individual and separate parts of Scripture and reinforces the ground for the development of theology, not the exercise of putting individual quotations from Scripture and authoritatively identified heretics under an

intellectual microscope and discovering therein meanings nearer to the heart's desire.

It is in this sense that tradition rescues us from being lost in Scripture's labyrinth of plausibilities. Pitstick has not invented her tradition. She has appropriated what she has received as tradition and has sought to reinforce its validity by calling to attention texts that are unambiguous in their clarity and orthodoxy. To the liberated intellectual, however, everything is possible, including the abolition of hell.

C.M. Sonadri Rao
Jericho, New York

I was disappointed in Edward Oakes' response to Alyssa Pitstick. At times he descends to the *ad hominem*. Why say gratuitously, of Pitstick's resorting to tradition, "her tradition," or, of her linking of the *limbus patrum* with purgatory, that it is "a strange innovation . . . from such an *über*-traditionalist as herself"? Whatever consideration Balthasar's views might deserve, Pitstick's rebuttals clearly fall in with the testimony of the ages, and Oakes verges on the disingenuous as he implies otherwise.

For Oakes to conclude from Ratzinger's remarks—non-papal and for that matter non-episcopal—that "Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent into hell has entered into the thinking of the highest reaches of the Magisterium" is to distort the concept of Magisterium. It is not what a pope, or a pope-to-be, thinks; rather, it is, among other things, what a pope teaches as pope.

At times Oakes writes as if unaware of the traditional teaching on limbo. Why create a problem where St. Thomas Aquinas and many others saw none, with "a limbo of the just ones, where Christ went to free these antecedently just souls from their [presumably unjust?] captivity"—as if Thomas' distinction were not perfectly clear between those ancients who had embraced damna-

tion through personal sin and those who, in expectation of a salvation yet to come, had lived in implicit preparation for justification in Christ but were, until his coming, excluded from the beatific vision?

Moreover, is it so very brash of Pitstick to be skeptical of Luther and Calvin as positive influences on theological development? Does their formal defiance of the Magisterium—their express heresy and its intellectual ramifications—count for nothing?

Stan Grove
Anchorage, Alaska

In assuming herself capable of authoritatively defining church tradition concerning Christ's descent into hell, Alyssa Pitstick effectively sides with those modern, anti-traditionalist thinkers who assert that the consensus of theologians is sufficient to ascertain whether a doctrine has been infallibly taught by the ordinary Magisterium. For Pitstick, "the consensus of historians of *descensus* theologies" is enough to fix the tradition with such propositional certitude as to judge Balthasar's theological efforts heretical.

In an age of theological dissent, such an apotheosis of a consensus of theologians appears fantastic. We should note instead Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, who points out that the task of authoritatively defining the content of the ordinary Magisterium resides solely with those who have magisterial authority, that is, with the Magisterium (the bishops teaching in communion with the successor of Peter).

Pitstick's minute exposition of what she asserts to be the "authentic and authoritative doctrine of Catholic faith" contrasts with the brevity of the presentation of Christ's descent into hell to be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Beyond this sure norm, the field for legitimate theological speculation is quite open. Pitstick instead thinks herself competent

to exclude on its face the Balthasarian proposal for a deepened appropriation of the deposit of faith.

For instance, she holds that church tradition exclusively defines the glory of the descent as that of the Resurrection, which for her is somehow to be contrasted with the glory of crucified love. Yet the *Catechism* affirms Balthasar's basic point that Holy Saturday cannot be divorced from the universal redemptive work of the cross. In the Gospel of John, the cross and the Resurrection are inseparable moments of a single event of divine glory, which is the unitive love of the triune God. As a theological category, glory is not showy triumphalism or a happy ending that would explain away suffering as docetic play-acting. It is rather the infinite love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit consummately expressed in the whole of the Paschal Mystery.

Perhaps Balthasar is a symbol for Pitstick, for the thrust of her argument seems ultimately to fall against the emphasis of Vatican II and the post-conciliar pontifical Magisterium on the universal salvific will of God and the hope that all men be saved. This hope is no novelty, unless a person privately judges as novel what is prayed during the Rosary: "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins. Save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of Thy mercy." This Christian hope has everything to do with setting out into the deep: pursuing the call to holiness in the new millennium. Only thus can we be credible witnesses of the love of God, which goes to the end.

Angela and David Franks
Brighton, Massachusetts

Alyssa Pitstick laid the groundwork for a fruitful conversation by pointing out what she believed to be a difficulty in reconciling some of Balthasar's ruminations on Christ's descent into hell with the Catholic tradition as has been commonly

understood and as the *Catechism* seems to teach. In response, Edward Oakes gives us two sentences on another of Balthasar's "difficult" views: an empty hell. For the rest, Fr. Oakes merely contents himself with labeling Pitstick as an anti-Protestant double-predestinarian Monophysite crank who believes in a pre-Christian purgatory. Apparently, this is supposed to allay our fears that Balthasar is, in fact, outside the pale of Catholic theology by tarring and feathering the chief witness.

Robert Colau
Exton, Pennsylvania

Watching from the other side of the Reformation divide the Balthasar debate that has been so prominent in the December and January issues of *FIRST THINGS*, I was struck that two theologians who claim to know so much about Balthasar know so little about my Reformed tradition yet feel free to criticize it. In dragging Calvin into the debate, Pitstick has either badly misread Calvin or not read him at all. Oakes has taken her misrepresentation of Calvin at face value. But Calvin is clear about his position on Christ's descent into hell: Christ's descent into hell consisted of the spiritual torment he suffered on the cross for the sins of the elect. Christ did not suffer torment in hell after his death. Pitstick is correct about the travesty this would make of the Atonement. It requires no detailed knowledge of Reformed theology to know it holds that Christ's death on the cross was entirely sufficient for our salvation.

(The Rev.) Douglas McCready
Kutztown, Pennsylvania

One is struck by Alyssa Pitstick's apparently allergic reaction to anything remotely tinged with Protestantism. She dismisses Nicholas of Cusa's contributions because his "doctrinal heirs" are Luther and Calvin. Karl Barth doesn't fare much better, and she mentions a single fact about Adrienne von Speyr—the

"source with the most telling influence on Balthasar"—which is that von Speyr was herself a "convert from Protestantism." The reader is expected to draw the appropriate conclusions. Pitstick's concluding line is a masterpiece of the diplomatic sneer, that "in the end we must say, . . . that Balthasar has made a real contribution to Protestant ecclesial theology."

Michael Kouyoumdjian
Blue Bell, Pennsylvania

By teaching the absolute separation of Christ from God, Balthasar has introduced a docetic schism in the two natures and possibly even a schism in the substantial unity of the Trinity. By teaching that the denizens of hell continue to exist apart from God, he has also introduced a cosmological dualism of some sort (and possibly inadvertently taught, as a corollary, that a created entity, such as Satan, has succeeded in becoming an independently existing entity). If Balthasar teaches something other than these heresies, that would be good to know for his defense.

Jason Pratt
Dyer, Tennessee

Edward Oakes snidely dismisses the idea of a purgatory in the Old Testament. But one of the reasons that the Protestants rejected the Books of Maccabees is that in 2 Maccabees 12:43–46 there is a clear reference to prayers for the faithfully departed. This has been traditionally interpreted by the Church as a reference to purgatory. Since the sacrifice in question occurred before Christ, there was a purgatory in the Old Testament where souls of the faithful departed were purified from venial sins before entering the limbo of the fathers.

Furthermore, Fr. Oakes seems to be at pains to avoid admitting that Pitstick faithfully reproduces the Church's traditional teaching: Our Lord descended into hell to save only the souls in the limbo of the fathers.

Luke 16:19–31 points to the radical separation between the righteous and the damned before Our Lord “harrowed hell.” In verse 26, Abraham remarks, “And besides all this, between us [the righteous] and you [the damned], there is fixed a great chasm: so that they who would pass from hence to you, cannot, nor from thence come hither.” The words of the gospel themselves point to a clearly differentiated afterlife, one in which there is no hope of salvation for the lost.

Tobias Torgerson
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

I take exception to many things in Fr. Edward Oakes’ attempted refutation of Pitstick’s critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar, but the one I wish to mention above all is Oakes’ most uncatholic understanding of the primacy of Scripture.

To grant Scripture a simple primacy over church teaching would leave us in the regrettable situation in which *sola scriptura* has left Protestantism: over a thousand fractured sects, all claiming to be founded on the plain meaning of Scripture. Any of the famous controversial questions—does John 6 bear witness to the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist? does Matthew 16 bear witness to the primacy of Peter in the government of the Church?—reminds us that no amount of scriptural study or exegesis can, by itself, settle fundamental disputes. As St. Irenaeus and many other Fathers saw at the dawn of Christian theology, only the Church in her authorized leaders is trustworthy in handing down the right and full interpretation, for it is she to whom the Lord *entrusted* Scripture, and it is she alone who is empowered by the Spirit to interpret truthfully what the Spirit of Truth inspired.

Peter A. Kwasniewski
Wyoming Catholic College
Lander, Wyoming

Oakes convincingly supports Balthasar’s position, especially in relation to St. Paul’s thought, and perhaps in time the Church may in a more official capacity incorporate his reflections on Holy Saturday into its teaching. But, to further this end, shouldn’t Oakes have used more of his response to show what new growth in these reflections was a genuine, if unconventional, development of doctrine? Instead, he wastes his breath saying, “No, *you’re* the heretic!” by accusing Pitstick of anti-ecumenism, undercutting papal blessings, and diminishing Christ’s redemption. Why not spend a little more time teaching those of us who are also anxious (and excited) about Balthasar’s thought and less time on bashing a fellow scholar? Isn’t that same kind of personal attack what upset him about Pitstick’s argument in the first place?

Benjamin Petty
Lisle, Illinois

I have researched and written extensively on Balthasar, and I find myself largely in agreement with Edward Oakes and somewhat puzzled by the tone of Alyssa Pitstick.

Balthasar seems to be charged with violating Catholic doctrine, but it is not clear exactly what violation has occurred. Pitstick moves freely between doctrine and tradition, as though the two were not strictly distinguishable. Unless I am mistaken, the only doctrinal matter involved is the fact that Christ descended to the dead. This is a point that is central to Balthasar’s theology; clearly no violation is involved here. If one were to extend the reach of that doctrinal statement to include the *effects* of the descent and the Resurrection—the freeing of those unjustly confined to Sheol and the opening of heaven—again, Balthasar has not challenged anything.

What Balthasar does refute is the pietistic tradition of Christ’s action as a heroic figure smashing the gates of

the underworld. He challenges this depiction for good reason. First, it is totally opposed to the Christ who, on earth, shunned the hero figure expected of the messiah. Why would his descent contrast so dramatically with his actions on earth? Christ’s actions among the dead, according to Balthasar, were more significant and profound—a silent witness of solidarity with the dead. This witness was necessary for two reasons: to bear the full weight of sin—including being totally forsaken by the Father—and to redeem even Sheol so it might become an instrument of God.

A second concern is that the traditional depiction of Christ as the superhero is largely drawn from apocalyptic literature. The few canonical sources for Christ’s descent are vague and only by a stretch of the imagination do they provide a basis for the heroic understanding. Granted, Thomas Aquinas interpreted Psalm 24 (and Colossians and Philipians) in this manner, but the text itself is far from clear. The only ancient texts that clearly refer to the “harrowing of hell” are apocryphal: the “Homily” of Melito of Sardis and the “Gospel of Nicodemus” (some would include the “Acts of Thomas” as well).

If the tradition that Balthasar is accused of challenging is largely that of noncanonical literature, then Pitstick’s reaction is overblown. If the matter is one of actual doctrine, she has not made her case.

Dan McGuire
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Fr. Edward T. Oakes replies:

When I first read Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, I realized that her arguments depended on three hidden presuppositions: a crypto-Monophysite Christology, a crypto-Jansenist theology of grace, and a crypto-Lefebvrist view of the Church’s teaching office. So in my two responses to her views in FIRST THINGS, I decided not

so much to defend Balthasar as to force Pitstick to remove the "crypto-" prefixes—by having her openly avow this trifecta of revanchist Catholicism. I deny that my attacks were *ad hominem*, as the letters from Robert Colau and Benjamin Petty claim, for I focused exclusively on her reasoning.

The Lefebvism can be seen both in her attempt to give catechism lessons to Pope Benedict XVI and in her picking only passages from the Bible that support her argument (ignoring passages that undermine her views, especially from Paul, whom she treats as a proto-Lutheran and therefore to be cordoned off).

The Jansenism comes through in her line that no one in the state of mortal sin can be called a friend of God, which makes a hash of the Beloved Disciple's teaching that when we sin we still have an Advocate before the Father who pleads our cause, because he atoned not only for our sins but the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–3).

But her Monophysitism is the key, for in my opinion it motivates her view that Christ did not descend even into her pre-Christian purgatory. By Monophysitism I mean that the divinity of Christ so overwhelms his humanity that he can no longer tolerate sin in his presence. This requires that the denizens of Pitstick's newfangled version of the *limbus patrum* be already in the state not only of justifying but also of sanctifying grace (without sins that need atoning), which is but another of her remarkable and literally unheard-of innovations on the tradition (*pace* the letter from Sonadri Rao). Thus her claim that "No Catholic who believes in the sinlessness of Christ's mother can deny this doctrine."

Such an invocation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception certainly guarantees the sinlessness of the Old Testament elect, but at what a price! First of all, it contradicts Pius IX's encyclical infallibly defining this

doctrine, which says that it was by a *singular* grace that Mary was preserved from original sin, a point missed entirely in the letter from Bill Hayward. Second, we are left to imagine some future ecumenical eschaton when Protestants and Catholics reach agreement on this dogma, only to be told that they have a new hurdle to cross. For now they will be told that, by a mode of transmission that makes *The Da Vinci Code* seem like plausible history, the Church has secretly, yet always, held that the grace of Mary's Immaculate Conception applies to the pre-Christian elect.

Given these strange and flagrantly anachronistic views, I was curious whether the readers who wrote to FIRST THINGS would spot these heresies or even share them. The Reverend Douglas McCreedy certainly shares Pitstick's version of the descent, though as a Calvinist. As he rightly notes, Calvin explicitly says that any suffering undergone by Christ on Holy Saturday actually took place solely on Good Friday. I presume he held to this view because a true descent by Christ among the reprobate would upset his doctrine of limited atonement and double predestination. Calvin goes on to aver, lamely I might add, that "those who say that I am reversing the order—on the ground that it is absurd to put before the burial what succeeded it—are making a very trifling and ridiculous objection," as if Saturday following Friday is theologically meaningless.

Certainly Michael Kouyoumdjian is correct when he spots Pitstick's use of the term *Protestant* as a mere sneer word, an odd rhetorical ploy to be making in an ecumenical journal, especially given the fillip of irony that her book is being published by Eerdmans, a Protestant firm. But Pitstick also has no historical grounds for asserting an exclusively Protestant concern with this theme. That is why the letter from Stan Grove is wrong

when it sees Calvin as a positive influence on Balthasar, although Pitstick's Jansenism might make *her* ripe for that charge.

I'll even up the ante by pointing out that Methodists dropped the line about Christ's descent into hell entirely from the Apostles' Creed. (It was restored in 1968 for ecumenical reasons.) One might object to this Methodist manhandling of an ancient creed, but it reflects, however unintentionally, ancient creedal confusion over this issue (asserted in the Apostles' Creed but omitted in the Nicene, etc.)—another sign that the tradition is nowhere near as univocal as Pitstick claims.

Tobias Torgerson cites 2 Maccabees as warrant for a pre-Christian purgatory and mentions the biblical theme, affirmed by Jesus, of the "great chasm" that separates the righteous in the bosom of Abraham (like Lazarus) from the damned in the lower regions of pre-Christian Sheol (where Dives dwells). Interestingly, Augustine, in his celebrated letter to Evodius on this gulf, admits the distinction but then says that Christ broke through that abyss, precisely because Peter teaches that Christ, after dying "as the just for the unjust," went to preach to "the spirits in prison who disobeyed God long ago." A few verses later, Peter adds, "For this reason the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God."

Even Cyril of Alexandria (not exactly known to history for his friendliness toward heretics) says in one of his Easter homilies that Christ went down to free *all* those who died before him, the devils excepted. (Origen says of this passage that Christ redeemed only a portion of these prisoners, which some scholars cite to claim that the historical Origen was no Origenist.) And in his *Exposition on the Apostles' Creed*, Thomas Aquinas asserts that the first and primary reason Christ descended into

hell was “to bear the whole *punishment* of sin, so that he might *wholly* expiate sin.”

Robert Miller seems to share Pitstick's Lefebvism by claiming that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* directly refutes Balthasar. I say, however, with Cardinal Schönborn, that the Church is not ready to make Balthasar's private opinion obligatory—which is a much different matter. Orthodoxy, after all, has two meanings (as Dan Maguire points out): what is allowable to hold, and what is obligatory to affirm. That is why John Paul II, and maybe Cardinal Ratzinger in *The Sabbath of History*, can disagree with Balthasar in non-magisterial books yet praise the cardinal-elect for his theological labors and fidelity to church teaching. To say otherwise would be to claim that the College of Cardinals elected a heretic pope in April 2005, since in all his writings on this theme Cardinal Ratzinger also espoused an expiatory Holy Saturday. Nor does the *Catechism*, as Miller claims, treat this theologoumenon “at length.” As Angela and David Franks rightly see, its treatment is quite brief. They also spot Pitstick's Lefebvrist tendencies, for which I am grateful.

I am also grateful for Dan Maguire's defense of Balthasar, although I doubt that all mythological language can be expunged from Christian eschatology. All the best exegetes point to the heavy influence of late-Jewish apocalypticism on the New Testament writings, on 1 Peter especially. True, care must be taken here, but Balthasar's critique of Rudolf Bultmann at least shows that he thinks demythologization can be taken too far. That is why he sought to transpose theology into dramatic terms, which in his view could incorporate the best of the mythological motifs of the Bible without landing us into an otiose literalism.

I do not understand Jason Pratt's letter claiming that Balthasar makes

Satan “an independently existing reality,” for it was the gravamen of my criticism of Pitstick that she leaves Satan's kingdom intact. One charming image of the early Fathers to explain the descent was that of a fishhook that Satan swallowed: The bait was Christ's human nature, and the hook his divinity. Or, to cite a higher authority, Jesus spoke of his descent by alluding to Jonah inside the whale in Matthew 12:40, implying that his task during his three-day sojourn in the underworld would entail going down into “the belly of the beast.” And by invading the citadel of enemy territory in that way, he defeated the “principalities and powers” that are trying to capture us for hell. Thus Paul says: “When he ascended on high he led a host of *captives*, and he gave gifts to men.” But under Pitstick's quasi-Calvinist scheme, Satan gets to keep these lost souls, who were foreordained for doom anyway.

On Bernard Blankenhorn's remarks concerning Adrienne von Speyr, I have nothing to add, as I have not read enough of her work to have much to say. (Her prolixity defeats me, although the little I have read I've found edifying.) Several years ago, though, the Lateran University in Rome did hold a symposium on her work, at which Pope John Paul II gave the opening allocution, where he said that eventually the Church's Magisterium would have to render a judgment on her work. That will take time, but I can wait.

I have saved for last my response to Avery Cardinal Dulles—but not because I disagree with him. I don't, except for his claim that the theme of double predestination is a red herring. (I think it animates, however implicitly, much of this debate.) In any case, I certainly would never set the Magisterium and tradition over against Scripture, as Peter Kwasniewski accuses me of doing. My problem was Pitstick's resolute refusal to address key verses of the

Bible on this theme *on their own terms*.

For example, St. Paul writes: “In saying ‘He ascended,’ what does [Scripture] mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens in order that he might fill all things.” These verses from Ephesians clearly refute Pitstick's claim that Christ made only a minor foray into the underworld, never going near even pre-Christian purgatory, let alone where real sinners dwell. But how can that debate be engaged when she short-circuits the Bible from the outset? Surely we must concede that Paul meant it when he wrote, “Scripture makes no exception when it says that sin is master everywhere” (Gal. 3:22), and not all the typological or allegorical interpretation can change that central fact of salvation history.

In all events, I am grateful for the cardinal's earlier essay “The Population of Hell” (FIRST THINGS, May 2003), where he wrote: “This position of Balthasar seems to me to be orthodox. It does not contradict any ecumenical councils or definitions of the faith. It can be reconciled with everything in Scripture, at least if the statements of Jesus on hell are taken as minatory rather than predictive. Balthasar's position, moreover, does not undermine a healthy fear of being lost.” Exactly.

Alyssa Lyra Pitstick replies:

The question I raised in this exchange, “Is the traditional content (meaning) of the profession of faith as binding as the profession's form (words)?” is echoed in many of the letters, transposed in terms of the relationship between Scripture and tradition: Scripture gives us words; does not tradition specify their meaning? There is no doctrine of Christ's descent that the Bible gives by itself, because its every reader stands in a history, hence in a doctri-

nal tradition, which influences his principles of scriptural interpretation. The stakes in answering our question are high: exegetical, Trinitarian, Christological, and, yes, also philosophical, sacramental, ecclesiological, ethical, and eschatological. No doctrine stands or falls alone.

In my response to Fr. Oakes, I have already addressed my alleged allergy to all things Protestant. No doubt his desperate spin on many issues will also mislead future readers—his egregious misreading leads him mostly to criticize me for positions I do not hold and assertions I did not make—but others will ask whether he read me with as open and attentive a mind as I read Balthasar. I appreciate Protestants on every point of truth, natural or supernatural, that unites us; on those that divide us, including Christ's descent, I disagree with them. Is that such an unreasonable or extreme position? Mr. Kouyoumdjian should be glad to have as an ecclesial theologian "the most cultured man of the twentieth century"; I did not "sneer" but only suggested we be clear about the tradition in which Balthasar stands regarding Christ's descent. In response to Rev. McCready, please note that I did not attribute Balthasar's doctrine to Calvin, nor to Cusanus, Luther, or Barth. I only said, and it is true, that Balthasar's lineage runs through all four. The great-grandson resembles his forefathers even as he differs from them. Because developments in that genealogy were not our focus, I did not specify differences. I can appreciate and sympathize with his protest, however: I do not like people thinking Balthasar expresses the tradition in which I stand either!

Some are concerned that I have misappropriated to myself definitive offices of the Magisterium. If I had, I would not have begun a debate. I readily agree that theologians cannot define anything with the authority of Christ. (And, for the record, the title of the exchange was not mine.)

However, theologians can recall what the Magisterium has taught. They can examine the treasures of Scripture, liturgy, religious art, and the theological reflections of saints and theologians past. And they can compare the work of other theologians to all the foregoing. It is on the basis of such evidence that "the consensus of historians of *descensus* theologies" arises that Balthasar's theology contradicts official Catholic doctrine. If the Franks find a "sure norm" of magisterial teaching about the doctrine in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, they can find no less in the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. That "norm" by itself is explicit enough to rule Balthasar's speculation illegitimate in the Catholic sphere. Mr. McGuire, who has reduced the doctrine to its formal profession, might also consult this document. He has overlooked that, for Balthasar, Christ descends "to the dead," in that he descends to the same (or worse) *condition* of utter *isolation*, whereas according to Catholic doctrine he descends to *the holy souls* and perfects their *communion* with him.

McGuire draws our attention, however, to two common misunderstandings of the *descensus* tradition. First, regarding the doctrine's basis in ancient texts: Scriptural evidence is meager when we neglect its stylistic characteristics (such as typology) and expect explicit statements that satisfy modern criteria for clarity. When the scriptural foundation invoked by the traditional doctrine is examined and more-comprehensive hermeneutics admitted, one can compile a much longer list of relevant passages (as I do in my book). As for noncanonical ancient texts, it is mistaken to think the doctrine has support in only two or three. One may begin to pay adequate attention to the evidence by surveying patristic commentaries on the creed and instructions for catechumens, tracking down a "classic" introduction (e.g., MacCulloch,

Grillmeier), or sampling substantial Catholic encyclopediae printed prior to 1960 (Catholic confusion on Catholic doctrine being a recent phenomenon)—but these would be only a beginning. I do not wish to overstate the case here; without doubt, other topics receive clearer and more-extensive treatment both in Scripture and in the later writings of the Christian community, but the doctrine has far more foundation than currently assumed.

As for dismissing some works as apocryphal, note that Christian apocrypha need not be the products of heretics or madmen; they are simply ancient works recognized as not having been divinely inspired. Taking into account their limitations and literary genres, these works may be considered as expressions of faith; the specific details in accord with the Faith, or those to be rejected, require consideration. Moreover, it is undeniable that the canonical Scriptures influenced the apocryphal ones. In addition, there are sufficient non-apocryphal texts. Consequently, later works that appear influenced by apocrypha ought not to be dismissed out of hand as if they had no substantial foundation in Scripture or the faith of the believing community.

Here is where the dramatic representations of Christ's descent come in: the breaking of bars, the forcing of doors, the trampling of the enemy, etc. Balthasar objects, McGuire likewise, and a slew of scholars join them. Apparently overlooking that these descriptions are all scriptural tags for the triumph of God, any number of scholars treat them as though the artists or authors (including some of the greatest theologians) believed Christ literally used armed force to enter the underworld and physically trampled on the devil. The "wise" thus fail to distinguish the moral and the medium, the doctrine and its expression, in a way that the "simple" managed to do quite successfully for centuries. The dramatic

representations are attempts to express an *invisible* event in *images*. But that is not to say the images are empty symbols, waiting to be given meaning “nearer [each] heart’s desire” (in Mr. Rao’s insightful words).

Our question about form and content, and the authority of tradition, returns: Are we free to interpret those images in just any way? Or would we then betray those who made them, and the faith they were striving to convey? Can the manifest glory depicted in representations of Christ’s descent be read as the “glory” of the crucifixion, which is apprehended only by the eyes of faith? Why then does the canon of *descensus* art depict Christ in his descent in the same manner as at his resurrection, surrounded by light? This portrayal is also found in representations of the Second Coming, which suggests the answer to McGuire’s question about the contrast of the descent with Christ’s earthly life: Christ will not come again as the mild babe in the manger! The judgment of this world and its powers has begun with Christ’s

death on the cross. The whole of God’s work in Christ is an “event of divine glory” (Franks), but that does not prevent that unified work from having distinct parts, nor does such distinction necessitate docetism.

Mr. Yocum and Fr. Blankenhorn are correct that the more important question concerns the truth of the doctrine, not Balthasar himself. I myself would prefer to stay focused on the doctrine. However, to question Balthasar’s theology seems almost necessarily read as questioning the man himself, since his reputation stands and falls with his work. Yet when multiple careful and dispassionate studies of the resources of Catholic theology (Scripture, tradition, and Magisterium) indicate that the man’s work contradicts authentic doctrine, then anyone who cares about the *traditio* of the faith becomes legitimately concerned that the man’s reputation reflect reality, lest it mislead. But to be fair to anyone so questioned, the clear existence of an authoritative doctrine must be determined and his knowledge of it considered. Just so, we don’t condemn many of the early Fathers for

expressions that are unorthodox to later ears. The structure of my original article reflects such an attempt, shall we say, to be fair to *both* the man and the doctrine, and so to be clear about the stakes for each. Those stakes are the same for each of us as for Balthasar, insofar as someone is ignorant or not of the Church’s doctrine and chooses to accept or reject it in consequence.

Questions similar to Fr. Blankenhorn’s insightful queries about the relationship of Balthasar’s doctrine with Speyr’s “experiences” I hope to address in a future book. That task necessarily depends first on having been clear about the “actual [Catholic] doctrine” (McGuire), its authority, and the incompatibility of Balthasar’s theology with it—the work of my first book. As for my own questions in this exchange, they remain unanswered: It seems Fr. Oakes and other Balthasarians either can’t answer them or refuse to do so.

By the way, the three-day sojourn was for the sake of the living, not the dead—*inter alia*, it proved the reality of Christ’s death.

Letrillos

Nativity

With God’s Word—the burgeon
that swells in her womb—
now she comes, the Virgin:
if you give her room!

The Sum of Perfection

Forget created things,
but their Creator, never;
the core attend forever;
love Him from whom love springs.

—St. John of the Cross
Translated by Rhina Espaillat